

The Long Shadow of History at Wounded Knee and the Pine Ridge Reservation

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WHEN A GROUP feels hopelessly oppressed, and their cries are confronted contemptuously by their oppressors, a civil dispute can spiral into crisis— burning buildings, blood in the streets, smashed windows, smoke rising in the air, screams against injustice, the clash of civilians and armed law enforcement, the normal civility of cities and towns collapsing into war-zones.

In April 1967, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. shared his opinions on the reasons that riots occur, and why they will continue to persist, when he told Stanford University about *The Other America*: “[R]iots do not develop out of thin air. Certain conditions continue to exist in our society which must be condemned as vigorously as we condemn riots. But in the final analysis, a riot is the language of the unheard.” Peaceful protests can quickly descend into civil unrest when the voices of the discontent are muzzled, justice is denied, and the disenfranchised are left with no other recourse.

In February 1973, a peaceful demonstration planned by the American Indian Movement (AIM) in the town of Wounded Knee, South Dakota, turned into chaotic civil disorder when heavily armed federal agents surrounded a few hundred Native American protestors, and the protestors

refused to leave. Leading up to the winter of 1973, AIM made concerted efforts to draw attention to the desperate circumstances faced by the indigenous population. The events that unfolded at Wounded Knee in 1973 were a result of the federal governments disregard for the lives and experiences of Native Americans. Tension and resentment accumulated when their attempts to address their circumstances were willfully ignored and suppressed. Their calls for justice and sovereignty were unheard, and when the federal government attempted to silence the demonstrator at Wounded Knee, the chaos that followed finally captured the world’s attention. Although AIM succeeded in capturing worldwide attention when they refused to leave Wounded Knee, the federal government made great effort to suppress their cries, many of their demands remain unfulfilled, and the conditions they were protesting either remain unchanged or have become worse. Dire and disempowering conditions persist today at Pine Ridge and other reservations across the nation, and violent repression of Native American protests continue.

In the 50 years since the 1973 occupation of Wounded Knee, there has been no progress, no justice. Dr. King’s warning has not been heeded. In this essay I explore the

events that triggered the 1973 standoff between Native American protestors and the federal government, what the protestors were trying to achieve, the immediate aftermath following the events at Wounded Knee, and the long shadow that continues to be cast over the Pine Ridge Reservation.

A dark shadow was already cast over the South Dakota town in 1973. This was not the first violent suppression of Native Americans at Wounded Knee: 83 years earlier, in 1890 Wounded Knee was the scene of one of the “bloodiest massacres inflicted on indigenous people in North America. . . [when US] soldiers killed between 150 and 300 Lakota” (Strickland). The US government has inflicted deep historical trauma on the citizens of Pine Ridge Reservation and Wounded Knee. In the fifty years since the unrest of 1973, the circumstances at Pine Ridge have not improved, and the cries of its residents remain unheard. 1973 was not the first time violence elevated Pine Ridge or Wounded Knee to historical importance, and I would be surprised if it is the last.

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution establishes our collective right to gather, to speak out against injustices, and address problems in our society within the framework of our governing institutions. The fact that civil unrest exists and persists indicate the system is not functioning as described for all members of our society. Not all voices are equally heard or considered, and the spectacle of civil disorder is timeless and all too familiar. Even though the First Amendment guarantees the right to a voice for the people, King points out that America has not honored its commitments to the entirety of the population. And, when society fails to listen to voices of the discontent, pressure and frustration build, and unrest and disorder are the results. King warns us later in his speech that these results will repeat themselves, in perpetuity, until the cause is addressed.

Riots are a symptom, not the disease itself.

On February 27, 1973, symptoms of the disease manifested in Wounded Knee when “a culmination of frustration felt by Native Americans” (Lindsley 115) erupted “in a violent and incomprehensible protest that [produced] a cry of agony from every American Indian” (Morris 171). Richard Morris, who was an assistant professor at the Department of Rhetoric and Communication at the University of California, Davis, wrote about the event at Wounded Knee. In his work Morris tells us that the United States government imposed on the reservations an inert tribal government system that disempowered its citizens while sponsoring corrupt tribal leaders that prioritized the interest of the US government. The established governing structure separated the residents of the Pine Ridge Reservation from any agency to improve their circumstances and eventually pushed the situation past the breaking point.

Upheaval had been brewing for a long time. As Dr. King pointed out, “. . . riots do not develop out of thin air.” While it was some five hundred years of oppression through “massacres, forced removal from homelands, disease, forced removal of American Indian children to boarding schools, prohibition of spiritual practices, and other acculturation strategies” (Dennis 9) that ultimately led to the event at Wounded Knee, it was the political and economic conditions at Pine Ridge that triggered the protest.

Two key events in 1972 began the escalation of tensions at Pine Ridge: the murder of Raymond Yellow Thunder in February and Richard Wilson taking office as tribal chairman April. Philip Roos, who was a professor of sociology at the Denver campus of the University of Colorado, wrote about the political, spiritual, and economic conditions at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation before, after, and during the

Occupation at Wounded Knee. Roos notes that unsolved murders of Native Americans were common in the small towns that surround the reservation (90). The authorities were uninterested and did not prioritize investigating these cases.

Murders committed against the indigenous population were not important to the police. Sheryl Lindsley, who was an Associate Professor of Communication at California State University, wrote about the rhetorical strategies of the Native American protestors who occupied the village of Wounded Knee. When Lindsley details the lead up to the standoff in her article, she mentions that authorities apprehended two white men suspected of beating Yellow Thunder to death, but later they released the men (118). Local law enforcement was apathetic toward investigating crimes against indigenous peoples. When local authorities were unwilling to help, Yellow Thunder's family reached out to AIM for support (Roos 90). Yellow Thunder's family needed a megaphone.

Answering the call for help, AIM brought their megaphones and members to Pine Ridge. In solidarity with Yellow Thunder's family and all residents with missing or murdered family members, AIM staged several protests against the indifference of law enforcement and in support of justice for Yellow Thunder (Lindsley 118). Convictions in cases like these were highly unusual. The attention that AIM's protests brought to the case arguably led to the two white men being charged with Yellow Thunder's death, and AIM gained notoriety amongst the residents of Pine Ridge for their involvement (Roos 90). In the months between Yellow Thunder's murder and the conviction of his assailants, a tribal election ended in political upset when Richard Wilson replaced the incumbent as the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Tribal Chairman of Pine Ridge (Lindsley 118). The tribal elections and

government were imposed on the reservations. These resembled an installed state imposed by the colonizing power, not a representative and democratic government.

The terms "Tribal Chairman" and "election" have the ring of a democratic system—almost as if citizens of the reservation are an autonomous self-governing people. However, the tribal government system is a structure put in place by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which is an agency of the federal government within the Department of the Interior. Braatz explains that the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934 mandated the tribal government system which "creat[ed] elected offices [within the tribe] with the authority to disperse reservation jobs and federal funds" (147). The structure forced on the tribe at Pine Ridge went against the traditional Lakota tribal governing practices and "deepened political schism between so-called 'progressives,' who were more willing to cooperate with the . . . BIA, and 'traditionalists,' who put up greater resistance to federal paternalism" (Braatz 147). Unsurprisingly, Roos informs us leaders of the more traditional Oglalas, who are the Lakota tribe at Pine Ridge, "disdain[ed] and condemn[ed] [the] tribal government" system. Despite their contempt for the structure imposed on them, the leaders of the traditional Oglala faction unofficially embraced candidates and had often swayed tribal elections. This election was different. The leaders of the traditional faction made no endorsement, and Richard Wilson, an acrimonious AIM adversary, became Chairman (93). This time the traditionalist faction of the Oglalas did not participate in the illegitimate governing structure.

The traditional Oglalas found no representation in the new tribal administration. In his article Roos described the economic and political divides at Pine Ridge: BIA representatives and employees had an

assimilationist agenda, and did not hold the same values as the traditionalists. Most of the jobs, income, and economic opportunities went to those who lived in the more urbanized areas of the reservation, adopted the values system of the colonizing society, and were more likely to support the aims and agenda of the federal government. Meanwhile, the citizens of Pine Ridge who followed the cultural traditions of their ancestors were confined to rural poverty (Roos 94). Willingness, or unwillingness, to assimilate into the colonizing society determined a segregated class disparity on the reservation. For a while, more traditional Native Americans were able to secure most of the political offices created by the BIA's tribal government system (Roos 94). With more traditional Native Americans holding some political power to represent their values and interests, this kept the political, economic, and cultural balance at Pine Ridge from becoming completely unbalanced.

With Wilson's election all semblance of balance was lost. Wilson, with the power to "disperse reservation jobs and federal funds among an otherwise impoverished population. . . blatantly rewarded" and catered to the most privileged residents who had assimilated into the colonial society (Braatz 147). He served the interests of the federal government instead of his tribe (Braatz 147), and used his own private militia to "ruthlessly. . . quash his. . . political opponents by any means necessary" (Lindsley 118). Wilson's actions rapidly exacerbated and escalated "the political tensions he inherited" (Lindsley 118). Wilson used his newfound power to line his pockets.

Wilson carried out his atrocities with a financial motivation. According to Morris, two wealthy white men financed Wilson's campaign and Wilson later awarded the men with land and business contracts on the reservation that exceeded \$15 million dollars (172). Morris goes on to say:

"[Wilson] was a pawn of the BIA and the federal government who hired people like him 'to mistreat the Indians.' He was, in effect, the embodiment of everyone who had prevented Native Americans from achieving self-determination" (172). Morris's point is, as an elected official, Wilson had a duty to be a public servant to the Oglala Sioux of Pine Ridge. Instead, he abused his office to enrich himself and his white cronies. He used violence and intimidation to repress his oppositional constituents, and directed his administration to fulfill the wishes of the federal government which did not have the tribe's best interest in mind. Wilson became a symbol of corruption and systemic oppression (172-173).

AIM began an "intensive organization drive" at Pine Ridge "reaching virtually everyone old enough to talk" (Roos 89). The traditionalist faction at Pine Ridge then created the Oglala Sioux Civil Rights Organization (OSCRO) "to seek redress for 'some 150 separate written complaints of civil rights violations' involving [Wilson and] the reservation government" (Morris 171). "OSCRO members presented their grievances in the form of a signed impeachment petition to the Tribal Council. The petition charged Wilson with misconduct, misappropriation of tribal funds, nepotism, and initiating actions and policies contrary to the interests of the Oglala Sioux" (Morris 171). The disenfranchised citizens of Pine Ridge attempted to exercise their First Amendment right to organize and to correct the corruption and injustices they were facing. However, at the end of 1972, Wilson used his power as Tribal Chairman to retaliate, and he banned AIM from the reservation after attempts to remove him from office failed (Lindsley 118). The cries of the marginalized were silenced and remained "unheard."

AIM and OSCRO were not to be muzzled for long, though. AIM quickly resumed

organizing protests in South Dakota at the turn of the year after another Native American was murdered in a nearby town. OSCRO and AIM stepped up their resistance to Wilson by filing “additional complaints against [him]” (Lindsley 118). AIM’s resurgence alarmed the BIA, and out of fear, the agency called the federal government for reinforcements (Lindsley 118). A crowd of OSCRO and AIM activists gathered as Wilson faced another impeachment hearing on February 23, 1973. OSCRO contends that Wilson and the judge met privately to strategize. Once again, Wilson was exonerated. Furious protestors departed the courtroom and held several days of meetings and demonstration after dubious justice had been served (Morris 171). Perhaps Dr. King would have called this “postponement of justice” in February 1973 another “winter of delay.”

The conditions were conducive for a violent storm. AIM called for a press conference to take place during a demonstration, and on February 27, “several hundred Oglala Sioux, along with supporters from other tribes” descended on the town of Wounded Knee (Lindsley 118). According to Lindsley, AIM leaders had only planned for a peaceful demonstration and intended to use the event to elevate public awareness by speaking to the press about the issues faced by the residents of Pine Ridge. The federal cavalry arrived as the activists were getting ready for the press conference, and the government agents were heavily armed. The FBI, the BIA, and the US Marshals surrounded the town “supported by nineteen armored personnel carriers, 130,000 rounds of M-16 ammunition, 41,000 rounds of M-40 high-explosive (for M-79 grenade launchers), helicopters, and Phantom jets” (118). The deployment formidably armed federal troops was an extreme and excessive response to a press conference and political demonstration. Wounded Knee was

unable to escape the long dark shadow of history when “Eighty-three years after the . . . [massacre], US officials had, once again, sent an army to crush a Native resistance movement” (Braatz 148). Commanded by their superiors to prevent the press from entering the town, the federal agents blocked off all roads and access points to Wounded Knee (Lindsley 118). Once again, the government attempted to forcibly silence the Native Americans from telling the world of their despair. Lindsley contends that the activists were surprised and alarmed by suddenly being encircled by armed forces, and in an act of defense they armed themselves by purchasing ammunition and firearms in the town. The protestors perceived themselves to be under siege as they “found themselves in a situation in which they perceived limited choices, constrained by government forces” (Lindsley 118-119). On the other side of the roadblocks AIM’s actions were cast as an “aggressive and intentional” “‘takeover’ of Wounded Knee” (Lindsley 118-119). The Oglala Sioux’s attempts to improve their circumstances and seek justice were blocked repeatedly. As Dennis Banks would put it months later, they were “abuse[d] for so long that the only thing they [could] turn to [was] confrontation. . . .” (Lindgren 02:02). Heavily armed federal agents surrounded the protestors, who then armed themselves. The situation escalated past the breaking point and a violent 71-day standoff ensued.

Despite the optics of armed, militant, combative protestors taking over a small town, this was not an attempted insurrection (Morris 179-180). Just as Dr. King acknowledged the “impracticality” of African Americans securing freedom from oppression through “violent revolution,” Morris noted that “the protestors [at Wounded Knee] could not hope and did not pretend to be able to secure their demands through violence.” A few weeks after the standoff at

Wounded Knee began, AIM leader Russel Means clarified that “we’ve known that the United States Government can come in and squash us, militarily. We never thought we could beat them, overthrow them” (Morris 179). AIM used militant and confrontational tactics, refusing to leave Wounded Knee in order to ensure that Native Americans would finally get the attention their situation warranted (Morris 180). A quiet and orderly peaceful protest would not have given the activists the world’s attention and a chance to be heard.

Finally, with the world’s attention, the Oglala Sioux agitated for the return of all of South Dakota west of the Missouri River that the US government had promised to them in the Sioux Treaty of 1868, as well as the investigation of all treaty violations. Furthermore, they wanted to see the reversal of poverty and destitution at Pine Ridge through the improvement of the economic conditions and increased job opportunities. Finally, the protestors demanded the removal of the corrupt tribal president Richard Wilson (Roos 92).

However, the removal of the corrupt leader of Pine Ridge would not be enough. Morris notes that “Wilson was not ‘the problem,’ but a result, a symptom of a larger set of problems, [and] simply replacing a ‘bad Indian’ would not suffice. A corrupt structure constructed by the dominant society had created Richard Wilson, and it would continue to create more like him” (173) unless the root of the problem was also addressed.

To address the root of their suffering, Morris said: “[t]he protestors immediately assured a sustained focus on structural issues by issuing a set of demands”: they wanted Congress to hold hearings on treaties made with American Indian Nations, investigations of the BIA and the Department of the Interior, and a congressional investigation of activity on all Sioux

Reservations in South Dakota (173). Shortly after declaring their demands, the Oglala chiefs invoked the Treaty of 1868 and announced themselves a sovereign nation (Morris 172). They drafted a constitution which had been endorsed by 1,400 tribe members (Lindsley 120). The Oglala dared to dream of independence and autonomy. “Their goal was to gain ‘the freedom to determine their own lives and destinies as a sovereign people’ by establishing ‘their own government, where they [could] run their affairs according to their own traditions’” (Morris 172). Roos contends that “AIM and traditional Lakotas consider[ed] their position legal, not radical or revolutionary” (91). They attempted to legitimize their movement by invoking the Treaty of 1868, using that document to guide their conduct (Roos 91), while modeling their declaration of freedom and constitution after those of the United States (Lindsley 121). However, in the eyes of the US government, the protestors’ actions were those of rebel insurgents (Roos 91), and as Lindsley contends, “The responses of the US government officials clearly did not reflect that they perceived the Native Americans [to be] due the same rights as those who were descendants of the conquerors” (121). The Oglala wanted their land back, they wanted the agency to govern themselves, and they wanted their citizens to attain the ability to live their lives without the meddling imposition of a hostile foreign occupying power.

The protestors held their ground for 71 days, but after two casualties they surrendered, and “their demands for [a] federal investigation of reservation injustices were quickly dismissed” (Braatz 148). The traditional Oglalas’ strenuous efforts to break the grips of their occupiers, seek freedom, self-sovereignty, and the territories promised to them in the Sioux Treaty of 1868 ultimately failed, and the tribe was punished. After the standoff at Wounded Knee, many

of the problems at Pine Ridge became worse. Wilson was not defeated, retained power for three more years, and used his private militia to “Terrorize Pine Ridge” (Braatz 148). Braatz goes on to report that “FBI agents declined to investigate the deaths of Wilson[s] opponents” (148). AIM’s hands were tied by a tangled web of legal battles with state and federal governments which drew their energy and resources away from the reservation (Roos 89). As AIM’s presence was disappearing, BIA’s presence surged. In 1974 and 1975, the BIA inserted bureaucrats and established offices in many villages in Pine Ridge (Roos 95). The BIA focused its resources on “law and order programs” and cut many social programs; more than half of the Sioux who had been employed by the programs lost their jobs (Roos 95). Roos notes that by 1975 “[t]he ‘normalcy’ of ‘unemployment, apathy, violence, drunkenness, hostility, dependency, illness and factionalism’ had returned” (89) to Pine Ridge Reservation. The BIA’s and the federal government’s actions appear to have been a reprisal. Sadly, this is not just a history from decades ago; similar events have played out recently, and conditions at Pine Ridge continue to be abysmal.

Philip Deloria, who is a professor of history at Harvard University, made a comparison of “the mobilization of the American military against Indian activists” (6) during the 1973 protests at Wounded Knee to the government’s response to the Dakota Access Pipeline protest of 2016. Deloria charged that “environmental racism” was committed against the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers “willing[ly] endanger[ed] an Indian community in order to distance a White community from danger” (6-7) when they “rerouted [an oil pipeline] away from the city of Bismarck, North Dakota” (7) and instead planned to pass it under the Missouri River a half mile away from

Standing Rock. According to Deloria, no one had made a genuine effort to consult the residents of Standing Rock who were concerned that a leak would poison their land and ruin their water (6-7). Over the course of a few months, a small prayer camp in protest to the pipeline swelled to ten thousand people when “Lakota and Dakota peoples were joined by Indigenous peoples from across North America and around the world” (Deloria 7). Once again “the protests were met with an astonishing display of militarized police power. Camouflage, gas mask, and body armor – wearing, AK-47-toting private guards, North Dakota law enforcement, and National Guardsmen faced down protesters” (Deloria 7). We would be naive to consider the scenes from Wounded Knee to be a relic of the 1970s.

The terrible conditions at Pine Ridge did not end in the 1970s, either; the suffering continues to this day. Dr. Mary Kate Dennis, who has a doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Michigan, a Masters of Social Work from Washington University and is an interdisciplinary researcher who focuses on Indigenous elders living in the US and Canada, interviewed 25 Lakota elders from Pine Ridge aged 55–98 years and “explored the traumatic events across the elders’ life span” (9). Dennis found that her interviewees were not only carrying the emotional wounds from their personal experiences living at Pine Ridge but also that “the experiences of a massacre more than 100 years ago are fresh in the memory of the elders. . . although the boundaries of the event are outside of their lived experiences” (14). Citing a study by Duran et al., Dennis argues that 500 years of oppression has “result in elevated rates of suicide, substance abuse, depression, interpersonal trauma, and health problems” (9). One does not need to directly experience an event to suffer from its effects. Finally, citing the conclusions from Whitbeck et al., Dennis

reiterates that “holocaust is not over for many American Indian people. It continues to affect their perceptions on a daily basis and impinges on their psychological and physical health” (9-10). The horrors of their ancestors continue to haunt them today.

In addition to the emotional scars the Oglala at Pine Ridge are confronted with challenging economic conditions. As of 2012 there were approximately 40,000 Oglala Sioux living on the Pine Ridge Reservation (Dennis 11). Oglala Lakota County is completely within the reservation, and in 2012 the US Census found that the county “. . . was the third poorest county in the United States, with unemployment on the reservation reaching nearly 89.5%, 53.2% living below the federal poverty line, and 60% of children under the age of 18 living below the poverty line” (Dennis 11). With few opportunities to find work and a lack of assets to fall back on, residents of Pine Ridge face an uphill battle as they navigate the obstacles that they are forced to endure. Katherine Bauer, who has a doctorate of epidemiology from the University of Minnesota, conducted a study of 432 families on the reservation (1346). Bauer found that “food insecurity is prevalent among families living on the Pine Ridge Reservation,” with forty percent of the families struggling to find adequate sustenance (1346). With no savings, no work, and poor access to food those on Pine Ridge find themselves in desperate circumstances.

These desperate circumstances are taking a toll on the physical and mental health of those who must endure them. Timothy Braatz, who is a professor of history and nonviolence at Saddleback College in Mission Viejo, California, found that on Pine Ridge “hopelessness is pervasive (149). At Pine Ridge infants die at three times the rate as compared to what is considered normal across the rest of the country, and the

average life expectancy for adults is only 50 years of age (Braatz 149). In his 2016 feature article on Al Jazeera, Patrick Strickland, who is the news editor at the Dallas Observer and a former senior reporter at Al Jazeera English, details the poverty, destitution, and violence that can be found presently at the reservation. Citing data from Re-Member, a nonprofit whose mission is to improve the living conditions at Pine Ridge, Strickland uncovers further implications on the public health at the reservation when he reports that more than eighty percent of residents suffer from alcoholism. Many are turning to the bottle as their only refuge from their circumstances. Heart-breaking, Braatz reports that the suicide rate is “extremely high” (149). The avenues for escape are grim. Strickland interviews one resident who considers Pine Ridge to be POW camp for the US governments war against the Native Americans. However, considering how residents of the US prison system often receive food and healthcare, it seems our government treats Native Americans worse than its’ prisoners, and our society has either forgotten about them or just does not care. There has been no progress at Pine Ridge since the protests at Wounded Knee in 1973.

Dr. King warned us in 1967 that “as long as America postpones justice, we stand in the position of having these recurrences of violence. . . over and over again. Social justice and progress are the absolute guarantors of riot prevention” (King). Leader and co-founder of the American Indian Movement (AIM), Dennis Banks, took a more militant tone when he spoke out during the Custor Courthouse Riot of 1973: “It is sad when mistreatment, and abuse, and neglect, and murder against Indian people become common. This is where it started and this is where it’s going to end. When you abuse people for so long that the only thing they can turn to is confrontational politics,

they are going to do that. It is a good day to die" (Lindgren 02:02). Dr. King tells us "riot[s] [are] the language of the unheard" (King) and Banks insists that militant protest is the only tool left when the cries of the disenfranchised go unanswered.

Out of frustration for what the Oglala were facing at Pine Ridge in 1973, protestors risked their lives and refused to stand down when confronted with fiercely armed government forces. They risked their lives so the world could know of their circumstances, know of their pain. Believing their cause worthy of dying over, they hoped their struggle would force change, improving their lives and the lives of their descendants. Despite the protestors' bravery a desperate situation persists at Pine Ridge. This is not just a story of historical conditions; this is a story of today! The events leading up to the Dakota Access Pipeline protest of 2016 and the militarized response to the protestors serve as one contemporary example. Braatz provides another when he recounts

an example that is reminiscent of 1973: "In 2000, a grassroots Lakota movement occupied the tribal headquarters [of Pine Ridge] in protest of tribal council corruption and neocolonialism" (149). The shadows from 1973 are cast on the present day. Not much has changed for the Native Americans since before the 1970s.

In the course of my research, I have long since concluded that future violence may come from our society's failure to respond to the agony and suffering inflicted on Native Americans. In a parallel line of thinking, Braatz apparently has come to a similar conclusion when he postulates that "with structural violence on Pine Ridge and other Sioux reservations intact, and with cultural violence of US society frequently reinforced, it may just be matter of time before the next outbreak of armed combat on the northern Plains" (149). Will we wake up and confront this problem? Failure to intervene risks another bloody, regretful, and repugnant chapter in US history.

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